

# How to Support the Democratic Revolution

*Michael Ledeen*

THE streets and campuses of our cities once again resound with the voices of demonstrators calling for the United States to "get tough" with its allies. Whether demanding that we sever all economic ties with the Union of South Africa, or that we pressure Philippine strongman Ferdinand Marcos to share power with his opponents, many Americans are clearly unhappy with the close embrace between their country and such regimes. In short order we can expect similar calls concerning our relationship with General Pinochet's dictatorial regime in Chile.

Such protests are by now a standard feature of public life in this country, but the issues raised by the protesters—which have to do with the nature of our alliances and the objectives of our foreign policy—remain among the most controversial in our national debate. The persistence of confusion about the basic purposes of American foreign policy, above and beyond the latest tactical wrinkle ("Nixon Doctrine," "Reagan Plan," or whatever), suggests that we have yet to come to terms with the requirements for America's proper role in the world. What, then, are those requirements?

IN RECENT years we have seen a remarkable series of transformations from dictatorship to democracy, in countries ranging from Turkey and Spain and Portugal to Argentina and Honduras. There is no question that these examples encourage other countries, especially those with a Spanish or Portuguese tradition, to move in the same direction (Brazil, Uruguay, and El Salvador are instances). In addition, there is the encouraging story of Grenada, where armed American intervention overthrew a Marxist dictatorship and returned the country to democracy, representing the first time that the Brezhnev Doctrine (according to which the Communist takeover of any country is irreversible) has been actively challenged. And, in Eastern Europe, there is the most ambiguous but perhaps ultimately no less hopeful case of Poland, where, despite all efforts to suppress it, Solidarity lives on.

If there is one central theme and organizing

principle of our foreign policy, it should be to support this movement—which some observers have called a democratic revolution—around the world. Our task is actively to encourage non-democratic governments to democratize, and to aid democratic movements that challenge totalitarian and authoritarian regimes. Not only should this be our objective, in a sense it must be our objective, for without this organizing principle and central theme, even the most brilliantly conceived *Realpolitik* will fail.

Such is the power of our own traditions and of our commitment to the universal value of democracy that Americans will not, for example, support a long-term friendship with a repressive dictatorship; our basic alliances must be with democratic countries, or with countries that are seen to be moving toward greater democracy. There is an important corollary to this axiom: except in extraordinary circumstances, the American people will not long give their approval to a foreign policy based purely or even primarily on abstract considerations of the balance of power.

Some decry this American characteristic, arguing that it makes it impossible to conduct a (presumably more effective) foreign policy, one based on a traditional conception of the national interest. Such criticism, however, is misguided, for the spread of democracy is the most basic of our geostrategic interests. If the democratic revolution should succeed, our security will be greatly enhanced; if the democratic revolution is defeated and rolled back, our security will be diminished.

These principles are often less well understood by ourselves than by our enemies, who recognize only too clearly that the existence of free societies threatens them. The vitality of democracy, its appeal to human creativity, and the unlimited range it gives to human development, strike fear into the hearts of those whose power depends upon shackling free people and insisting upon a single "truth." The most aggressive of our enemies, the Communist totalitarians, aim to remove democracy from the earth, in order that they may finally feel completely secure. This point was driven home by the Central American leaders interviewed by the Kissinger commission. Every head of government testified that so long as the Sandinistas were in power in Nicaragua, all chance for democracy in the area would be mortally jeopardized.

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The implication is clear enough: if we are serious about the democratic revolution in Central America, we must challenge Nicaraguan (and Soviet-sponsored Cuban) totalitarianism there; if we are serious about the democratic revolution in general, we must challenge Communist totalitarianism in general. Indeed, our struggle with Communist totalitarianism—like our previous war with fascist totalitarianism, and like our struggle with dictatorships of all stripes—is unavoidable, a matter of political principle which is simultaneously a strategic national interest. It is not the other side of the coin, it is the same coin as our support of the democratic revolution.

NEEDLESS to say, however, solid unflinching support for the democratic revolution does not mean the abandonment of good sense. American policy-makers cannot be deprived of such essential tools as the choice of the lesser of two evils, the strategic pause, and the wait-and-see. Although we certainly prefer democratic regimes to anti-democratic ones, we should by now also have learned that many of the world's worst tyrants (Stalin, for one) wrap themselves in the mantle of democracy, while some of those we have viewed as hopelessly repressive have actually paved their countries' way from dictatorship toward democracy (Generalissimo Franco providing perhaps the most interesting example). All too often in the recent past, moreover, we have seen dictators friendly to the United States replaced by hostile totalitarians, to the benefit of our enemies and the detriment of our own interests and those of our allies.

Some American policy-makers and intellectuals have concluded from this circumstance that forthright, universal support for the democratic revolution is in fact a dangerous and counterproductive policy, one that will bring us into conflict with some of our most important allies, in areas vital to our national security. The objection is a serious one. How can we continue to maintain close friendships with foreign leaders when we are simultaneously intruding into their internal affairs, trying to get them to dilute their authority and significantly change their political system? More ominously, if we start demanding that South Africa end apartheid or that Marcos share power with his opponents, are we not inviting a reprise of the North Vietnamese takeover of the South and the replacement of the Shah of Iran by the Ayatollah Khomeini, two cases in which a mildly repressive (and friendly) ally was defeated and a far more evil force (both from the point of view of the people living in those countries and of American interests) soon came to dominate the scene?

Yet our having failed in the past does not mean that we must continue the pattern in the future. Our various errors of judgment and omission should not lead us to abandon a policy essential

to our interests and of a piece with our national traditions. In part, the Vietnamese and Iranian disasters occurred precisely because we lacked the courage and wisdom to fight for those traditions. Our failure to support the Shah during the crisis of 1979 was criminal, but we could and should have acted in such a way over the preceding quarter-century as to have made the crisis unnecessary. That would have required years (not just months) of steady pressure on the Shah to undertake a gradual liberalization of his regime, to share power with the emerging new middle class (mostly trained in the United States), and to limit his own authority. In this sense intelligent American "meddling" in the internal affairs of other countries is fully justified, for if we encourage allies to become more democratic, it is in order to make their own governments more stable and our alliances more durable.

That having been said, one must add immediately the qualification that it is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to achieve a successful transition from dictatorship to democracy in the midst of a violent crisis. When one of our undemocratic allies is under attack from anti-democratic forces that are also hostile to us, our first obligation is to support the ally, and only then to address the question of greater democracy. In Vietnam, we often acted as if its leaders (and perhaps even the system of government) could be changed without undermining the high morale necessary to sustain the war effort in the South. In Iran, having failed over the years to nudge the Shah toward liberalization, we then conspicuously failed to come to his side in his time of crisis.

THERE are of course factors inhibiting the successful prosecution of a long-term policy of critical support for undemocratic allies. One of them has to do with the way the Left and the Right in domestic American politics line up on the issue of repressive governments. The Left condemns out of hand governments ranging from South Africa to Honduras to the Philippines while tending to turn a blind eye to left-wing dictatorships and/or actively to support Marxist-Leninist guerrilla movements like the FMLN in El Salvador or SWAPO in Namibia. Moreover, this support often continues even after the guerrilla movements seize power and establish single-party dictatorships. As for the Right, it denounces Communist regimes while tending to take a benign view of even such extreme dictatorships of the Right as Pinochet's Chile, Stroessner's Paraguay, and Argentina under the generals who preceded Alfonsín.

Both the Right and the Left are wrong. The error of the Right is to confuse alliances of convenience with principled, durable rapport. We may indeed sometimes be forced into close working relations with undemocratic or even anti-democratic countries, but as a practical matter we

have to be able to show either that our ally is moving toward greater internal democracy or that there is a crisis so grave as to require our holding firm. If the crisis is of insufficient proportions, or if the democratic credentials of the society fail to pass muster, the American public will not long remain convinced of the necessity of the alliance and it will be broken by the winds of political storms. Marcos and Pinochet, as well as their friends in the United States, should have realized long ago that without movement toward greater democracy, America's support would eventually be called into question.

But if the Right frequently misunderstands the role of the democratic ethos in our foreign policy, the Left all too often performs the more damaging role of rendering that policy impotent, by devising abstractly moralistic standards of democracy that no country can possibly live up to. This extremely dangerous tendency was at work during the fall of the Shah of Iran, when the Carter administration—egged on by elements of the media and the universities—contributed to the paralysis of one of our most important allies. In the opinion of many in the Carter administration, the record of the Shah in human rights justified cutting off support in his hour of need. They held to this opinion even though, in the context of the Middle East, Iran was a remarkably decent place, and even though there was every prospect that a change in regime would make things far worse.

At the same time that the Left holds our allies to impossible standards, it tends to exempt our left-wing opponents altogether, taking their every encouraging word at face value and even urging patience and understanding in the face of barbarisms committed by self-proclaimed "revolutionary" regimes. The cases of Cambodia and Communist Vietnam leap to mind, as does that of the Ayatollah's "revolution," which at the time was mistaken for a movement of the Left and defended as such. During the 1982 war in Lebanon, to cite another example, the systematic terror visited by the PLO upon southern Lebanon over the previous seven years was hardly ever mentioned in the liberal press. (David Shipler did finally write about it in the *New York Times*, but only after the first wave of fighting was over.) It is not as if the Cambodian and Vietnamese Communists, or the Iranian Shi'ites, had neglected to provide detailed descriptions of what they were planning to do once they came to power, or as if the PLO's activities in Lebanon were a secret. The Left simply declined to believe what was there to be seen; it thereby contributed its own decisive share to the American policy fiascos of the recent past.

**I**F OUR support of the democratic revolution is to have any chance of success, then, the first thing we must learn to do is to assess, realistically, the difference between our friends and our enemies. The second thing we

must learn, or relearn, is the difference between authoritarian and totalitarian dictatorships. As it happens, most of our undemocratic allies fall into the former category, most of our enemies into the latter. As it also happens, the prospects for achieving democratization are much brighter in the former than they are in the latter.

The reason is a simple one. In authoritarian dictatorships, the repressive power of the regime generally rests with a single individual or ruling group, and if that individual or group passes from the scene, then meaningful change becomes possible. In authoritarian Spain, once Franco died, the system evolved in a very few years into a full-fledged Western democracy. In totalitarian dictatorships, by contrast, it is the system itself that performs the evil work, generally through the instrumentality of institutionalized terror. Nor does the perpetuation of the system depend upon any single individual: in the Soviet Union, with the death of Lenin, Stalin stepped forward, and after him there have been others, while the system has remained fundamentally unchanged.

The capacity of authoritarian regimes to change does not even depend upon the death or removal of their leaders; in Central America, the military regimes of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala have shown themselves quite able to provide for a smooth transition from dictatorship to democracy. The Salvadoran army has been a driving force behind the successful democratization of the country. In Honduras, the army stepped aside in favor of a freely elected civilian government, while in Guatemala free elections have been promised and a new constitution is being drafted, under the eyes of the current military dictatorship. Farther to the south, Uruguay and Brazil are following suit.

Not only is the democratic revolution more likely to succeed in authoritarian countries than in totalitarian ones, where transitions of this kind are not possible, but our own best chance at helping to bring about the necessary transformation is in countries friendly to us—*provided* that we are perceived by them as steadfast allies who, while calling for change, nonetheless respect and are willing to defend their integrity against our common enemies. That such a strategy can work is demonstrated by the example of Turkey, where we recognized the legitimacy of a military dictatorship that was installed because the country had fallen prey to a violent wave of terrorism, but urged the generals to restore power to the civilian politicians as soon as possible. Once the terrorist threat was quelled, this is exactly what the generals did.

In the Philippines, what the future holds is uncertain. We have, currently, given Ferdinand Marcos two messages: we will support him, but there is a limit to our patience. This tacit threat has real credibility in the Philippines, where we have considerable economic and political lever-

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age, and where we can also contemplate without alarm the possibility that Marcos might be replaced by his most outspoken opponents. Over time, the Philippines will either evolve toward greater democracy or undergo violent internal conflict. The country will not put up with Marcos forever, and neither should we: if Marcos is unwilling to reform, we should seriously contemplate organizing the opposition and supporting it against him, provided the opposition is democratic and its leaders are talented and mature enough to see the country through the difficult transition. If these qualities are lacking, then we will be faced with the unpleasant but unavoidable task of selecting among several poor alternatives.

South Africa is a different matter altogether, because we are morally opposed to the very basis of South African society. No American government can long refrain from outspoken criticism of apartheid, and over the long term, barring a major crisis, if there is no evidence of evolution toward democracy the American people will make it impossible for an administration to work closely with Pretoria. But there is also no gainsaying the fact that we are in almost complete agreement with Pretoria in international affairs, and there are good reasons to fear that a drastic change in South Africa might prove so destabilizing that we, and the entire West, would pay an enormous strategic price for it.

Had Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe turned out to be more democratic and more tolerant of its white and black political opponents, one might be more sanguine about demanding one man/one vote in South Africa; but as things stand today, the United States can hardly urge South Africa to follow the example of what was once Rhodesia. Then again, had we the capacity for real covert action, we might secretly support the democratic element of the South African opposition while openly supporting the Pretoria government; but this strategy is not available to us, because we can no longer keep such actions secret. The problem, in short, is probably the most agonizing one we face in our foreign policy.

**Y**ET with regard to the regime in Pretoria, as well as similar, less hateful regimes elsewhere, it cannot be emphasized too strongly that whatever influence we do have will be frittered away entirely unless our allies can be confident that we will not abandon them. That is why today, the great touchstone of American credibility is Central America. It is there that the democratic revolution has the brightest prospects, and there that our commitment to the democratic revolution is being most severely tested. The challenge is all the more dramatic because it

is taking place close enough to our borders to constitute an issue of national security.

We have quite vocally stated in Central America that we will not tolerate any further expansion of Soviet/Cuban/Nicaraguan power. Yet we have not acted in accordance with that declaration. Despite the near-universal recognition that Nicaragua is heading internally toward Communist totalitarianism, that it represents a major Soviet beachhead in our hemisphere, and that it is indispensable to the guerrilla war conducted by the FMLN in El Salvador and by other like-minded groups in Honduras and Guatemala, Congress has decreed that we may not challenge the Sandinista regime in Managua. Nor has the Reagan administration fought hard enough to retain financial support for the contras.

The net result is that it is now an open question whether the United States will bring any meaningful pressure to bear on our Cuban and Nicaraguan enemies, or whether we will leave them free to set the level of conflict in El Salvador and the timing of their attacks throughout the hemisphere. If the latter should turn out to be the case, then we will have sent another depressing message to those around the world who contemplate taking up the struggle for the democratic revolution and who have looked to us as its ultimate defender. We will have told them that Vietnam and Iran are the enduring models of American policy, and that Grenada was simply a momentary aberration.

If we fail in Central America, regimes from Manila to Pretoria will be the more likely to reject our suggestions for change, reasoning that they have only themselves to depend upon in the face of their enemies. The same goes for southern Asia, where the government of Pakistan must decide how much support to give to the freedom fighters of Afghanistan; after all, if the United States cannot protect a nearby ally against Nicaragua, can it be expected to shelter a distant friend against the Soviet Union itself? And the same goes too for northern Africa, where the foes of Libya's Muammar al-Qaddafi may be tempted in desperation to seek an accommodation if Libya should offer it.

The list can be extended, from Solidarity in Poland to the refuseniks in the Soviet Union, from the opposition to Castro in Cuba to the democratic foes of Pinochet in Chile. It is only by remaining true to our principles—which in Central America means supporting the democratic revolution in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, while exerting our utmost effort to thwart and ultimately reverse the totalitarian advance—that we can confidently expect to find others willing to take their own risks for freedom and democracy.